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ABSTRACT

To gather information on the role of gender in parent-adolescent interactions, a study was conducted of patterns of alliances formed during disagreements between 28 male and 28 female early adolescents and their parents. Interactions among adolescents and their parents were recorded while they planned an ideal vacation, and the transcripts were coded for meaning, occasions of disagreement between two individuals, and alliances formed in the disagreement by the third person. Alliances were defined as a third person entering a disagreement and taking sides, and were coded as either supporting or negating the idea in dispute. Results indicated that: (1) parents formed more supporting and negating alliances than did adolescents; (2) boys and girls did not differ in the way they formed alliances, while parents showed significant gender differences in their coordination of responses to disagreements; (3) mothers formed more alliances in families with boys than in families with girls; (4) when fathers opposed sons, mothers were more likely to add their opposition than fathers were when the mothers opposed sons; (5) fathers were more likely to take sides by supporting ideas in families with boys than in families with girls; and (6) fathers were more likely to support mothers' ideas when opposed by sons than when opposed by daughters. Graphs of alliance patterns are included. (AC)

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Alliance Patterns formed among Early Adolescents and their Parents

by

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ABSTRACT

Male and female adolescents have different experiences self and relational development in families (Cooper and Grotevant, 1987). This study examined gender patterns in alliances formed during disagreements between 56 early adolescents and their parents. Alliances were defined as a third person entering a disagreement and taking sides (Vuchinich, Emery, & Cassidy, 1988), either by supporting or negating the idea in dispute. Discourse during a 20-minute negotiation task was coded for how alliances were formed and who formed them.

Parents formed more supporting and negating alliances than adolescents. Boys and girls did not differ in the way they formed alliances or whom they formed alliances with. Differences did exist between mothers and fathers. Findings indicate that mothers and fathers coordinate their responses to disagreements differently in families with boys compared to families with girls. These results may be a demonstration of how families respond to the differential power of males and females during negotiations. They show some of the ways that mothers and fathers coordinate their responses to the views of sons and daughters.

QUESTIONS

- How do early adolescent boys and girls coordinate their views with mothers and fathers together?

- Does gender affect how family members form alliances while negotiating disagreements?

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects were 56 middle-class, Caucasian early adolescents (28 males and 28 females, mean age of 11.4 years) and their parents.

Task

Participants spent 20 minutes planning a fantasy, two-week family vacation for which they had unlimited funds. Daily activities and locations were recorded on paper.

Coding

1. Audiotapes of the task were first transcribed and utterances coded for meaning (Condon, Cooper, & Grotevant, 1984).

2. Adolescent-parent conflict episodes (N = 506) were identified and coded for 12 negotiation strategies. Reliabilities ranged from .82 to .99 across dimensions (Koch, 1992).

3. Alliances (N = 296) were identified from conflict episodes.

Alliance Code

Alignor The person who intervenes and takes sides in a disagreement: M=mother, F=father, A=adolescent

Types Negating: Person intervenes by opposing idea
Supporting: Person intervenes by agreeing with idea

Examples

Negating Alliance

M: Or where else can we go?

A: Hawaii!
(Adolescent proposes idea)

M: That's pretty far.
(Mother opposes idea)

F: It'd be hard to work all that in.
(Father opposes idea = negating alliance with mother)

M: Yeah.
(Mother continues to oppose idea)

F: Okay, so we leave here and go to Acapulco.
(Father continues to oppose idea)

Supporting Alliance

M: Where are we gonna go on sightseeing then?

A: Lahina, and go shopping.
(Adolescent proposes idea)

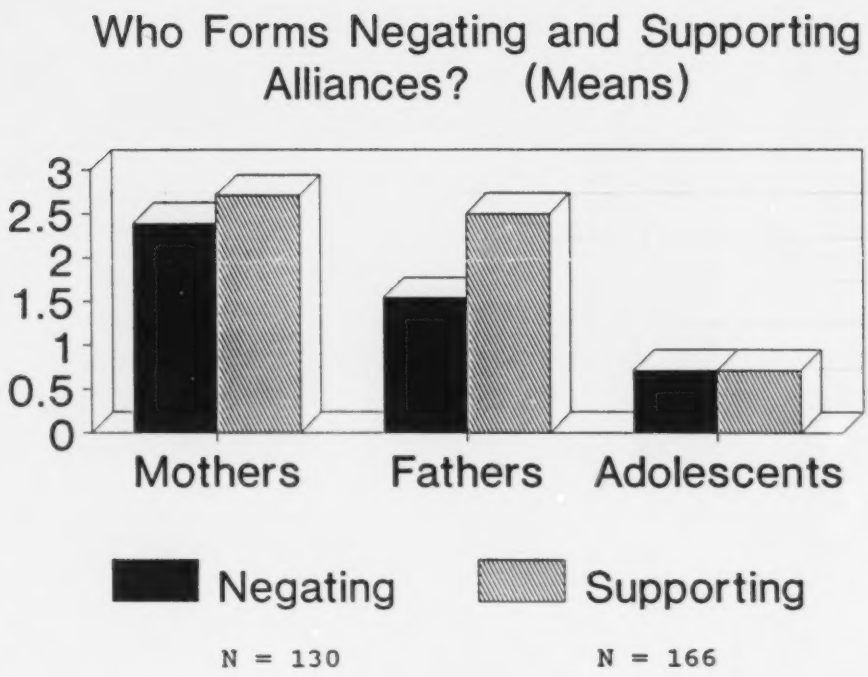
M: I don't think there's anything special in any of those stores. You're not gonna look at 'em again?
(Mother negates idea)

F: You gonna get some jams this time?
(Father supports idea = supporting alliance with adolescent)

A: Yeah!

F: Okay, so we'll pretty much go shopping there.
(Father continues to support idea)

RESULTS



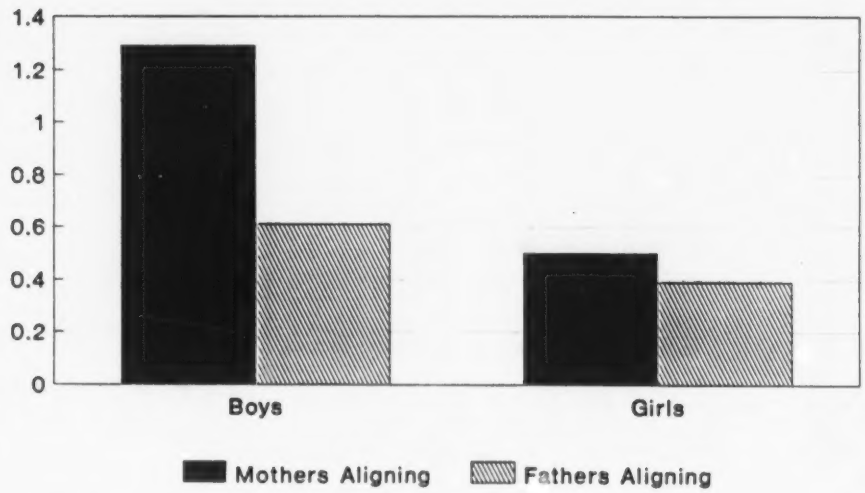
Results from a 3 (Alignor) X 2 (Type) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor:

Alignor	$F(2, 108) = 34.22$	$p < .001$
Type	$F(1, 54) = 12.55$	$p < .001$
Interaction	$F(2, 108) = 23.63$	$p < .001$

Tukey's post hoc comparisons:

- Both mothers and fathers formed negating and supporting alliances more often than adolescents, $ps < .01$.
- There were no reliable differences between mothers and fathers.

Alignment Patterns by Gender of Adolescent (Means)



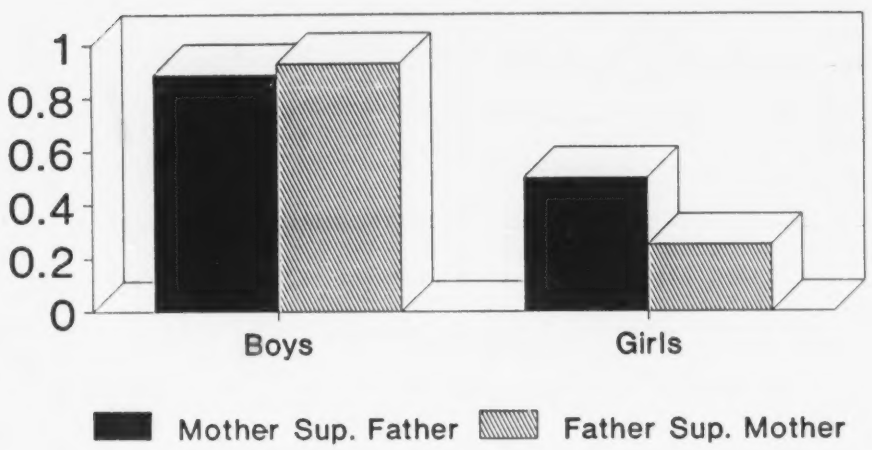
Results from a 3 (Alignor) X 2 (Gender) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor:

Alignor	F (2, 108) = 16.74	$p < .001$
Gender	F (1, 54) = 9.14	$p < .01$
Interaction	F (2, 108) = 2.82	$p < .06$

Tukey's post hoc comparisons:

- Mothers formed more negating alliances in families with boys than mothers in families with girls, $p < .01$.
- When fathers opposed sons ideas, mothers formed more negating alliances compared to fathers (when mothers opposed sons), $p < .01$.
- No differences occurred in families with girls.

Supporting Alliances When Adolescents Oppose Parents (Means)



Alignor	$F(1, 108) = 17.59$	$p < .001$
Gender	$F(1, 54) = 3.01$	$p < .09$
Interaction	$F(2, 108) = 2.82$	$p < .07$

Tukey's post hoc comparisons:

- Fathers were more likely to take sides by supporting ideas in families with boys than fathers in families with girls, $p < .05$.
- When sons (compared to daughters) opposed mothers' ideas, fathers supported mothers more often, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The combination of alliance patterns may be a demonstration of how families express the differential power of males and females. While early adolescent boys and girls did not show differences in how they formed alliances or who they formed alliances with, their parents did. When fathers opposed sons, mothers formed negating alliances, adding their opposition to the idea. Fathers on the other hand, did not act similarly when mothers opposed sons. The greater number of negating alliances formed by mothers in families with boys may be demonstration of mothers' tendency to express disagreements indirectly toward males. Fathers and mothers responded similarly when either one opposed their daughters' ideas. Rather than letting mothers defend their ideas in the face of opposition from sons, fathers supported mothers more frequently than when daughters disagreed, even when the number of conflicts was controlled for. It may be that the opposition of daughters was less threatening than the opposition of sons or it may be that fathers did not want to intrude on what they perceived to be a close mother-daughter subsystem. Another possibility is that fathers formed more supporting alliances with mothers because of sheer number of disagreements from sons. Taken together, these alliance patterns provide some insight as to how mothers and fathers coordinate their responses to the views of their early adolescent sons and daughters. The examination of alliance patterns helps to reframe our dyadic understanding of parent-adolescent negotiations in terms of family systems.